

Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy

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I beg indulgence for an opening anecdote that will perhaps point the issue at hand in a useful direction. I am descended from an honorable line of traveling preachers and car salesmen. As to the preachers, one forebear in particular would occasionally suffer a certain reluctance among the flock when he made his call inviting potential congregants to come forward and receive the benefits of faith, which—to invoke the other side of my family tree—was not unlike the annual call to view new car models back when model change was real and something people could believe in. In order to instill courage among the reluctant, my clerical forebear would use a plant, his infant daughter, placed at the rear of the crowd. If there were no adults willing to respond when the solicitation came, the toddler would make her way forward, at which point my preacher-ancestor would conjure the weak of heart to heed the courage of even a little child. It never failed, or so I am told, and that is pretty much the business we are in now, enlisting the yet-to-be-converted, students and parents as well as attendant “deciders” (to invoke that disagreeably trendy term) on behalf of a larger community of faith, with the end result being, if not salvation precisely, at least making a sale. To that good end, a little show business never hurts (more about that shortly), which gets to the questions at hand when it comes to admissions standards. What are we offering? Who gets invited? How do we decide? How will we know we have made the right decision? Obviously the third question is the most relevant when it comes to honors admissions standards, but we cannot get there without some notion of the other concerns: our product, our customers, and our after-market results.

Starting with the first question, then, what are we offering? One thing for sure, it is not a chance to be just like everybody else, whether for faculty, staff, or—perhaps most importantly—students; here, egalitarianism would be a falsification of our history, which traces its origins to England’s ancient universities and then to our colonials’ ivy league before making its way to the diversity of institutions where honors thrives happily today, as becomes clear in Annmarie Guzy’s useful history. Along the way, honors has lost its patrician

pedigree, acquiring a more broad-church, populist identity, at least in terms of the kinds of institutions where the call to honors is being issued nowadays, which is a point Norm Weiner made recently in this journal:

By the twenty-first century, many people had come to see honors education as a way to bring “ivy league education to state universities” or to small private (often religious-based) colleges. Tellingly, no ivy-league school has a university-wide honors program today. Honors has moved from its upper-class, elite origins to a decidedly middle-class footing. (21)

As Weiner points out, what we are offering is a way up, “helping our students climb the class ladder” as well as helping them to “realize how smart and talented they are despite their society’s assumption that the more something costs, the better it must be” (23). Consequently, honors education is “both elite and middle-class” (24), as he concludes; it is not for everybody (thus elitist), but, for those we let in, it is a decidedly middle-class affair, based on the great promise of this immigrant society of ours that people deserve a chance.

So, we are agreed that honors is offering a kind of elitist entitlement to a flock of middle-class aspirants and strivers who wish to make their way up in “this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hog-stomping Baroque country of ours,” to quote that apt phrase of Tom Wolfe (55). As his characterization suggests, the good work of elitism is no easy calling, set upon as we are by every manner of mountebank and false prophet, all claiming “excellence” as the basis of their evangel. Our present moment, historically, is—if anything—all the more “tabescent” and mendacious than when Wolfe wrote almost a quarter century ago, and this offers both a challenge and an opportunity. “[T]he assumption of *excellence* has been weakened,” Sam Schuman writes, “if not lost. It seems we have drifted towards a culture of mediocrity. Or, if that is putting it too dramatically, a collegiate culture where, too often, doing OK . . . is OK” (71). Schuman was writing about the future of NCHC and the directions that our organization might reasonably take. In the same issue of *JNCHC*, published in 2001, Joan Digby looked at the culture of mediocrity Sam referred to and offered a call to action: “[I]t is time for NCHC to voice its standards in the larger world of higher education and the popular media” (73), which is precisely what we have been doing for the past decade and more—maybe not so visibly or forcefully as we might, but that has been our cause.

If you were to look at our official statement of honors philosophy—or philosophies—on the NCHC web page, at the top of the list is “academic excellence.” (The list, I should add, is not alphabetically ordered.) Of course, as one of my used-car-selling ancestors might have pointed out, it goes without saying that everything on our lot is excellent since we are the ones doing the

selling. But we need to be sure that every once in a while something actually is excellent, which gets at the crux of both my first and second questions about what we are offering and to whom.

We are thus far agreed. We are offering an elitist entitlement based on academic excellence and the chance to move up. And while the call might go out to the many, it is the few we choose who make real and visible our claim to excellence, or else they turn out to be merely OK and show us up for liars. OK students are kind of like the oatmeal some on the used-car lot would put in a worn-out transmission to assure a certain short-term smoothness of gear shifts; they are phony grist for the tuition mill, likely to expose both themselves and us to criticism and possibly negative funding outcomes in this hog-stomping, assessment-obsessed political culture of ours. In any event, OK is surely not what honors is all about.

So, how do we choose those few who make real the claim for excellence? I am talking about students, but the same goes for faculty and staff. If we are going to bear proudly the standard of elitism and excellence, we will want to be clear about the picking. For those who might be contemplating some romantic, populist objection about now, I would urge the following point. If you have a front door on your house, you have already voted for elitism, not wanting just anybody to come in, and, if your college or university has any admissions requirements at all (from paying tuition to having a minimum ACT or SAT score), then you are working at an elitist institution. The issue, then, is whether we are willing to be up front about the standards we use and then defend them for honors, and this issue gets back to the matter of deciding who gets in, who does not, and how we decide.

I might seek guidance here from my colleague the athletics director, a man who is surely searching for excellence; hardly a week goes by that his admissions standards are not put to the test, visibly, in the gym, in the pool, or on the playing field. Few among us are held up to that kind of ongoing public assessment. So, how does he choose? Are the fencers held to the same standard as left tackles? Are swimmers measured by the same qualifications as the wrestlers? Of course not. Each program has its own types of excellence.

The same goes for honors programs and colleges. Each one is unique, with its own mission and goals relative to the mission and goals of the academic institution where it is housed. Diversity is important not just among but within honors programs, where we should select students according to standards specific to outcomes for, say, STEM students or musicians or historians or, yes, athletes. However, diversity—academic, ethnic, racial, class-related, age-related, or all of the above—is not the only goal. Like the athletics director and the way he builds a program, we need to remember something about a great team: each member is different, from the tight end to the tackle, but all share

a common purpose, or else they fail because they lack one. *E pluribus unum*, as our national motto has it. It is worth recalling the origin of that magisterial phrase in a poem attributed to Virgil, “Moretum,” that, as Adam Gopnik reminds us, “describes a farmer making something rather like pesto: he pestles together cheese and garlic and herbs and oil, and sees that, though the whole is something quite new, each little green or cheesy bit doesn’t completely blend in but keeps its own character” (46). Honors administrators are up to the same challenge, promulgating elitist admissions standards that, if they work, will yield a diversely excellent academic cohort with a coherent institutional identity: “Out of many, one—without betraying the many,” as Gopnik says (46).

Before getting specific about admissions standards, we need to think about the playing field where the many strive to become one. I cannot improve on Joy Pehlke’s characterization of the various ambitions that converge there, so I will quote her at some length here:

The attention to honors represents an intentional effort on behalf of university administrators to advance their universities’ academic reputations. The inherent benefits of honors programs include attracting and retaining more intellectually motivated students to the university, raising the overall intellectual level and reputation of the campus, providing an interdisciplinary honors curriculum that offers special seminars and independent study opportunities, and encouraging an innovative and experimental interaction between faculty and students. (28)

If an honors program works, its students—like athletes—are seen to stand for the whole institution and what it is capable of achieving: one cohort that represents all, *e pluribus unum*. When it comes to issuing the all-important call that will summon the many to one pesto-like unity, admissions standards are the most powerful representation we have of who we are, so they had better be good ones and true.

Admissions standards put me in mind of Groucho Marx and his famous quip about not wanting to belong to any club that would accept people like him as members. All honors administrators are good Marxists by definition, so it is incumbent on us to establish admissions standards that advertise not only who gets in but, by implication, who is kept out—a principle that again should apply not only to students but to faculty and staff as well. Richard Stoller provides a useful classification for admissions policies as either “skimming” or “free standing,” skimming as the application of a given set of standards (usually a combination of ACT/SAT and GPA scores) to distinguish honors students from all students accepted at a given institution, and free standing as a separate honors admissions process that adds essays, interviews, recommendations, and/or other elements to standardized test scores and GPAs (79).

Having been the author of more than one report about student success, I have an idea of the formidable body of research that exists on the question of skimming or free standing, about admissions policies generally, and about the data mining that might seem a necessary first step toward defining proper policies. This research is all well and good, but when it comes to the immediate task at hand, we may not have time for exhaustive longitudinal studies. Students are showing up, and admission decisions have to be made, so it seems as if the only practical alternative might be just relying on blind faith, which is all the more tempting if you happen to be in a situation where you do not have access to sophisticated statistical analysis and institutional research. Say it's just you and the pile of applications on your desk: how do you decide?

Unless you are starting a new program, you have probably done your longitudinal analysis already, perhaps unaware, no matter what the size of your program or the data-mining resources at your disposal: students have taken honors courses, gotten grades, completed requirements, and graduated (or not). You can look at who has succeeded, by whatever measures you choose to define success, and then admit more students like these. The basic principle is simple; the harder question is what characterizes these successful students at the point of their entering the institution. I have been fortunate enough to have a colleague who is a brilliant statistician and has spent a great deal of time conducting an ongoing longitudinal study of honors value added at our institution. One part of that study is an analysis of potential admissions criteria and the various data points that might go into an admissions matrix. What we have concluded, after a lot of statistics that are dizzying to me as an English professor, is a solution that strikes me as elegant in its simplicity. Out of all the possible permutations and combinations of data, it turns out that in my honors college the most reliable predictors of an entering student's success are ACT score plus high school GPA. Neither one alone is nearly as accurate as the two in combination, and we have discovered a further, equally elegant way to relate them by multiplying the one by the other. For example, a student with a 3.75 GPA and a 28 ACT score ($3.75 \times 28 = 105$) will perform, on average, about the same as a student with a 3.9 GPA and a 27 ACT score ($3.9 \times 27 = 105$).

Now, I am not proposing to apply one formula across the board. Honors is the home of pesto-ecuminism, after all. The same admission standards will not be sufficient for all constituencies, e.g., first-time freshmen, transfer students, students who join honors after a year or two, returning veterans, and students admitted to special programs within honors. In many cases we will also want to define appropriate measures for achieving diversity, perhaps by building bridge programs to prepare successful candidates while they are still in school. Our bridge program starts as early as eighth grade. In every instance, however,

we need to be up front about what is driving admissions decisions and why our measures are appropriate. We need to demonstrate that we know what we are doing and be able to show that the students admitted to an honors program or college are capable of achieving at the level we expect so that they are retained and graduate successfully. Otherwise, the claim for excellence is an expensive lie that cheats students out of their good faith and tuition dollars.

We can now return to a theological version of Groucho's insight: faith is about being called to something better. The challenge is enlisting students actively in the process of their own election—to a cohort that is not merely Lake Wobegon OK but one that is demonstrably excellent. Here I would offer my honors college's annual recruitment program as an example—one among many different possibilities, obviously. We skim our applicant pool for likely invitees, with free standing measures being applied variously to different constituencies within that group. We put on a campus event for an audience of admitted students and guests on a Saturday or Sunday. Our auditorium holds about six hundred people; every seat is filled, with people also sitting on stage and latecomers in an overflow space outside, watching on TV. It is quite a happening, which is just what we intend. We want all these smart, ambitious, excellent students and their guests to see how many others just like them are there, and we want to engage these young scholars knowingly in the process of their becoming honors students. My school is a Carnegie research university (RU/VH as they are called); the state where I live has three, with the two others, in Ann Arbor and East Lansing, being within easy driving distance of our campus. One not-so-disguised goal of our event is to make sure that guests are mindful of the kind of school we are and the opportunities we offer as well as the distinctive strengths that set us apart from other schools, particularly those two just down the road. As Joy Pehlke says, honors represents an intentional effort to advance our university's academic reputation—among students themselves, their parents, and also faculty, staff, and members of the community, who play a part in this recruitment day.

The whole admissions process—if staged properly, with showmanship and panache—is the most powerful means at our disposal for evangelizing on behalf of our excellent good cause, no matter the size of the institution or the nature of the competition. We should make the most of this opportunity by being honest about what we are doing. Once we have published up front what it takes to be invited, the power of the honors invitation depends on our visibly recognizing achievements—in that room full of guests, regardless of how large or small the room might be—achievements that are worth rewarding because not just anybody can claim them. On this Marxist principle, Groucho and I are agreed.

So now we arrive at the final, after-market question: how we know if we have devised a successful admissions policy. We can measure success by the number of new students coming in the front door, their subsequent retention and graduation rates, and their academic performance along the way. Our institutions as a whole, though, use this same process, raising the question how to evaluate honors over and above such general measures—aside from the notion that we are part of the rising tide that floats the boats of student success and institutional reputation. If this notion is generally accepted, as it typically is, then honors becomes a kind of obligatory add-on, like wi-fi access; without it, your institution seems somehow retrograde, which accounts—at least in part—for the proliferation of honors programs and colleges in recent decades and consequently the return of Sam Schuman’s question about the claim to excellence and whether what we do genuinely deserves the name “honors.”

All of us who work in honors education believe we are adding value; the challenge is to prove the value-added claim and thus to justify our existence and the money spent sustaining it. What I am proposing is a data-based assessment of the equally data-driven admissions policy that you put in place. For example, you might evaluate the performance of comparable cohorts of students—some who are enrolled in honors and some who are not—to look at the number of credit hours students take or the time to graduate or the performance of underrepresented students.

As honors administrators, we need to show that we know what we are doing and have the numbers to support our claims—aside from the claims of qualitative superiority that we can all provide. The goal is to define honors according to certain measures of excellence for students coming into the institution and to show that our choices are right because students who enter with these characteristics perform demonstrably better thanks to the good work we do in nurturing the qualities we have identified. One analytical caution, however, is that the data must be comparable: cohorts of similarly qualified students as they enter, some in honors and some not, so that all the apples really are apples in the comparison. If we have done our homework properly, we can have the experience—like that moment when my forebear’s child would make her toddler’s way forward, summoning the faith of even the skeptics and weak of heart—of seeing non-believers giving an amen. Further, we can put a dollar value on our good works, perhaps showing that honors students on average take more credit hours per semester than comparable non-honors students or that retention is better among the honors population. Then multiplying the difference between honors and non-honors students by the tuition paid per credit hour provides value-added translated into a monetary bottom line. Even an English professor with a calculator is up to that level of mathematical

challenge. Checking the number of academic or financial “holds” among the two groups and calculating the cost of staff time to process each hold might also show that honors students are cheaper to have in the house than non-honors students.

Whatever measures we use, my point is this: a well-conceived admissions policy tells us much more than whom to recruit; it becomes the basis for a quantitative defense of what we do with data and puts a convincing dollar value on the good evangel of excellence. Like my circuit-riding forebears—who would hitch up under a shade tree and hope to gather a flock, knowing that, if their pitch failed, they would have to ride off hungry without any fried chicken provided by a grateful congregant—honors administrators either succeed locally or else not at all. What goes on under your own particular shade tree, in other words, is what matters most.

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